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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA'S NEW VISA REGULATIONS MEET EU
STANDARDS, STRENGTHEN ANTI-TIP EFFORTS

REF: TIRANA 27

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Macedonia's new Law on Foreigners has caused a stir domestically and in Albania by requiring visas for Albanian travelers to Macedonia to be issued at the Macedonian Embassy in Tirana rather than at border crossings (reftel). In fact, the new law is fully compliant with EU acquis and will strengthen anti-TIP efforts. The government has decided to delay implementation for Albanian travelers, pending upcoming high-level bilateral talks with Tirana on the matter. Although government handling of advance public relations preparations for implementing the new law was sloppy, Macedonia should not be faulted for taking action to strengthen border controls and support ongoing visa facilitation talks between Brussels and Skopje. End summary.

IMPACT ON ALBANIA -- NO VISAS ISSUED AT BORDER CROSSINGS

12. (SBU) Macedonia's new Law on Foreigners entered into force on January 1, unleashing howls of protest from ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, and public and private irritation in Albania (reftel), over provisions eliminating the issuance of visas at Macedonia's border crossings. Under the new procedures, visas to enter Macedonia must be issued at Macedonian Embassies or other consular facilities. In this case, the new procedures will apply to Albanian citizens, who need visas to enter Macedonia, but not to citizens of other bordering countries -- Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia -- whose citizens do not require visas to enter (although they must enter with valid travel documents).

GOM TRYING TO EASE THE IMPACT ON ALBANIAN TRAVELERS

13. (SBU) According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the government has approved an interim waiting period for full implementation of the new requirement for Albanian travelers.

The head of the ethnic Albanian DPA party, a junior governing coalition partner, told us January 10 that he had won the approval of Prime Minister Gruevski to delay implementation in order to minimize the practical impact of the law on both sides. The DPA chief admitted that the government had failed to do adequate advance public relations work to soften the impact of the new law, which had been on the books for several months. According to the GOM spokesman, PM Gruevski will discuss the matter with his Albanian counterpart during their upcoming meeting in Tirana "in the first quarter of 2008."

IMPACT ON GREEK TRAVELERS -- NO MORE PASSPORT WAIVER

¶4. (U) Under the new law, foreigners entering Macedonia may do so if they possess a valid travel document and a valid visa, if required. That provision effectively supersedes the government decision reached last year to allow Greek citizens to enter Macedonia only with an id card, rather than a passport, which Skopje viewed as a goodwill gesture toward Athens. According to local press accounts, the mayors of Macedonian border cities already have complained that the new regulation has caused a drop in the number of Greek weekend visitors. Greek citizens now will be required to enter Macedonia with a passport, although visas are not required.

IN LINE WITH EU REGULATIONS AND COUNTER-TIP GOALS

¶5. (U) EU contacts in Skopje confirm that the Law on Foreigners was prompted by EU requirements. The EU's 2007 progress report on Macedonia specifically called for the GOM to take "necessary measures...to avoid issuing visas at the border." According to the EUSR office here, implementation of the new law is essential to progress on current visa facilitation talks between Brussels and Skopje.

¶6. (U) In addition to tightening border security measures by eliminating the issuance of visas at border crossing points, the Law on Foreigners also contains articles that will strengthen anti-trafficking in persons (TIP) efforts here. Article 81 allows persons suspected of being TIP victims to be issued visas to remain in Macedonia for up to two months while they decide whether to testify against suspected traffickers. The two-month period can be extended in the case of a possible victim who is also a minor. Article 82 allows for possible victims to be granted a six-month temporary residence permit if they have agreed to testify

SKOPJE 00000022 002 OF 002

against traffickers.

COMMENT

¶7. (SBU) The government certainly could have done a better internal coordination and external public relations job to explain how the new law's provisions would affect Albanian and Greek travelers. However, in our assessment the passage and implementation of this law will have positive effects in meeting EU requirements, and on strengthening the country's anti-TIP efforts.

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